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An English Colony in Floyd County

BY JOHN POUCHER, D. D.

[The author of the subjoined article is a native of England, in the heart of the Puritan region, Lincolnshire, born in 1843. In 1851 he came with his parents to New Albany, and has been a citizen of Indiana ever since. His activities have been confined chiefly to the southern portions of the State, though he was for twelve years an instructor of ministers in DePauw University at Greencastle, and for four years a presiding elder or superintendent of a Methodist district centering in Indianapolis. He has been a Methodist preacher, engaged consecutively in the itinerancy, for forty-eight years, and for the last five has been the senior pastor in his conference of three hundred and thirty-nine members.

Dr. Poucher is a graduate of Indiana Asbury (now DePauw) University, and of Garrett Biblical Institute (theological school) at Evanston, Illinois. The latter institution unsolicited conferred on him the degree of doctor of divinity. He was married to Miss Annie M. Cross, a Methodist preacher's daughter and a writer of genius, who bore eight children, of whom seven completed a collegiate course, and with their marital alliances represent sixty-three years of under- and post-graduate work.

Our contributor has written numerous articles for the leading magazines and periodicals of his own church and for various other theological and secular publications, much appearing as editorial matter. He was a contributor to the *Biblical Encyclopaedia* issued in this country under supervision of the Scribners. With a taste for historical research and reminiscence he has issued several pamphlets pertaining to places and institutions in Indiana. At present he is the Methodist pastor in Orleans. —EDITOR.]

In 1841 William Wattam and his newly-wedded wife, Mary Wright, emigrated from Lincolnshire, England, and landed at New Orleans. They engaged passage on a steamboat coming up the Mississippi and turning into the Ohio, and stopped at the foot of the Falls on the Indiana side, as far as the craft could go. There were a few other English people in New Albany, but they were not connected by family or local ties. Four or five years later one of Wattam's brothers followed, and soon after arrival joined the United States cavalry forces in the war with Mexico. He returned safe and sound, and continued to reside in Indiana till his death, leaving several descendants who are good citizens. In

1850 three other brothers and three sisters with their families and the aged mother sailed from England, and joined the colony. A year later, 1851, the remaining sister and her husband and son, with ten or fifteen other persons, reached New Albany, and most of them began to cultivate the rich river bottoms just below the city. Various other parties from the same part of England from time to time were attracted to the garden spot which soon became famous for its productiveness and beauty.

Heretofore the land had been occupied chiefly by renters, and there was one tract of over eight hundred acres made inalienable by the owner, a condition that was always considered unfavorable to the highest development of the community. The original tenants, besides entertaining territorial prejudice against the British, did not accord a hearty welcome to the new comers who instituted methods of farming which required severe manual toil, distasteful for various reasons, but some did not disdain to profit by the example of the colonists who were very successful in raising crops that brought handsome prices. The products were chiefly potatoes, cabbage and other marketable vegetables sold mostly at wholesale for the southern trade.

Among the native landholders was Thomas H. Collins, who managed his farm on principles scientific and theoretic. On his tract about one mile below town he employed many laborers at high cost. He became famous throughout the country, commanding newspaper notice from afar, but unfortunately his expenses exceeded his income, and he was forced to move on cheaper land in a back county, and finally was reduced to keeping a street-corner fruit stand in Louisville. Others were more fortunate, and became comparatively wealthy, though a few of the more enterprising deserted the region and settled happily about Charleston, Illinois. Still other of the Americans went further down the Ohio river, not too proud to adopt there the new methods which had proven so remunerative.

The colony was re-enforced by other immigrants coming from time to time as late as 1873, and one about 1887. From that date the population has dwindled and changed in character, and there are not nearly so many inhabitants now as fifty years ago, and very few own the soil they till.

Most of the land was heavily timbered, and as none of the Englishmen were adept with an ax they were compelled to let out

the clearings to native Hoosiers, who felled the trees and fenced the land for the cordwood, which they sold in the city. Systematic drainage equal to any of a more modern period was instituted, and the land soon commanded fabulous prices. Part of the Collins tract sold for over three hundred dollars per acre, and much of the ground even further from town could not be bought at any price. By their methods of intensive culture a crop of one hundred barrels, two hundred and fifty bushels, of early potatoes per acre might be raised and sold at \$1.50 per barrel net or more and placed at a steamboat landing only a few rods distant with a one-horse wagon in half a day. A stand of Drumhead cabbages, three or four thousand to the acre, might follow, and be sold from three to ten cents a head to be shipped in bulk on the New Orleans steamer like the potatoes four or five months before. The land possessed intrinsic value.

The houses were painted and all the outbuildings whitewashed, the premises ornamented with grassy lawns, graceful shrubbery, and brilliant flowers. The farmers could afford to own the finest horses that appeared in New Albany, often harnessed to single carriages or buggies costing in those times \$250 or more. While the river road was not then macadamized, it was comparatively level, and as the gardens were beautiful to behold with a background of the low Knobs half a mile away, and the magnificent river bedecked with majestic steamers on the other side, it was a favorite drive for pleasure-seekers from New Albany and Louisville. It is now a boulevard on which vehicles are constantly in sight. J. B. Norman, editor of the *Ledger*, one of the most influential Democratic politicians of his time in Indiana, fell in an apoplectic fit while on this road, and died before reaching the city. Through the influence of Mr. Collins the Indiana State Fair was held at New Albany in 1859.

The colonists, born almost in sight of John Robinson's Puritan meeting-house where later Wesley, a native of the same county, won such splendid triumphs, were mostly Methodists in their church affiliations, and the community was never racked by sectarian differences or controversies. Wattam, though a common renter at first, in 1849 led his neighbors, chiefly natives, in building a little frame church known as "McKendree," on the highest knoll about two miles down the river. One-half of the site was deeded by Samuel Angel, a somewhat eccentric Englishman, not

related to the main group, on condition that a seat should be reserved in perpetuo for members of a colored family who resided in his house, regardless of the bitter race prejudice then existing. The pulpit was supplied by a circuit-rider, sometimes of indifferent ability, who had five other points, some as far as twelve miles away. He received \$100 a year for one visit in three weeks. Englishmen, who had been accustomed to two sterling sermons on a Sabbath in the old country hungered for richer spiritual food in greater abundance, and it was not long before one of the preachers was induced to live in the neighborhood. Then a little pastoral charge was constituted with "McKendree" as the center where a preaching service was held every Sunday morning by a minister who on finishing his term was appointed a presiding elder. No ordinary talent could satisfy these farmers, who were systematic readers of the Bible and church literature. One preacher, who soon after filled the pulpits of the strongest churches in Indianapolis and Baltimore, relates that being pressed for time in preparation, he followed a sermon outline appearing in small print in the *Ladies' Repository*, a Methodist monthly, but he soon observed a knowing smile on the faces of some of his hearers, and abashed at being detected, he went off without his dinner, vowing that if the Lord would forgive him this time he never would repeat the offense.

Another pastor was taken in the middle of the conference year to occupy the pulpit of the best church in the city. The religious society had gained such enviable eminence that even a college paper in its alumni notes reported one of the most popular graduates as "preaching for the English farmers below New Albany." They considered themselves in a position to ask for a representative preacher from the General Conference delegates at Indianapolis to come and spend a Sunday with them. They had been used to listening to the most distinguished preachers, like Robert Newton, four times president of the Wesleyan Conference in England. There were scarcely ever more than fifty members in the class, but they promptly paid their pastor five hundred dollars a year for an afternoon service later on. Many prominent city Methodists, preachers and laymen, would attend the meetings, and after a bountiful repast would spend the rest of the day in thoughtful and animated discussions on theology. The members have been known to contribute an average of three dollars each for mis-

sions. The little church at one time or another produced seven itinerant preachers of whom some became famous, and all were useful.

The social decline began late in the sixties, though it was scarcely perceptible for eight or ten years, but the greatest slump occurred after the three devastating floods in uninterrupted succession in 1882, 1883, and 1884. Many of the buildings were swept off by the raging waters, and the top surface of the soil to a considerable depth was washed away. Quite a number of the earlier-settlers had died, or moved in old age to the city or elsewhere, and the remaining residents were spiritless and without competent leadership. Very few of the descendants of the colonists remain on the soil, though some of the land has not changed ownership for seventy years. It has been said that the first generation of aliens born in America do not show the thrift and self-initiative of their parents, but it would be difficult for any to maintain just such a standard of high and successful living as was exhibited in that English colony.

A most remarkable phenomenon in connection with this social movement is the startling decrease in the commercial value of the land. While it is almost as fertile as formerly, it is not nearly so productive, partly because insect pests have multiplied, but chiefly from a change in the personnel of the occupants and their standards of agriculture. Improvements on the farms have gone to rack. The New Orleans market was destroyed in the decay of river navigation, and the monopoly once enjoyed for garden commodities ended with the expansion of the railway system. While land in almost all other parts of the country has constantly advanced in price, this has steadily gone down so that the salable value has been reduced to one-third or even one-fifth of its former figures. It is an unnatural condition that will certainly change for the better.